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ABSTRACT

An address to faculty and staff considers the question of how quality can be improved at the various levels of a college. The importance of a shared sense of purpose is emphasized. Three goals of postsecondary education are discussed: to produce desirable changes in people; to do so through means that are consistent with social values; and to maintain people's capacity to continue performing their functions in the future. The role of the individual in the organization is discussed in light of theories in organizational behavior. Ten "do's and dont's" for improving quality are presented, including: (1) take responsible action, even if it is not responsive; (2) be sure that essential, basic functions are performed well; and (3) value and enhance the traditions and historic continuities of the organization. Contains 5 references. (KM)

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The Many Faces of Quality

Ellen Earle Chaffee

An address for faculty and staff orientation day
for the Community Colleges of Spokane,
Spokane, Washington
September 10, 1984

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Dr. Grote told me that you all comprise the best community college system in the Northwest, and I believe it. But he doesn't want you to rest on your laurels. So he has asked me to pass along to you some ideas that arise from our research--ideas that suggest how each of you can make the Community Colleges of Spokane even better.

You have grounds for objecting to my presumptuousness in agreeing to Dr. Grote's request. After all, I've never been here before--how could I know what might help you? Even if you are willing to credit me with some expertise, the fact is that I have not evaluated you--I do not know your strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, I cannot know what, if anything, you need to know in order to improve.

On the positive side, I may be just as well off not knowing your strengths and weaknesses. During an interview with an evaluation researcher, one college representative exploded as follows:

> This evaluation will be a waste of time, for either it will demonstrate that the program is excellent or that it is defective in some sense. In the first case it is a waste of time because we already know that it's a good program, and in the second, it's a waste of time because we would not believe any evidence of weakness.

So in all humility, I ask you to grant me a few minutes to tell you things you may already know, simply hoping that you'll find my reminders to be timely, perhaps a little bit inspiring, and mercifully brief.

I find it helpful on occasion to look at the familiar as if I had never seen it before. That's not easy, but a simple device can help. Suppose a Martian landed in Spokane. Let's say it's the Martian who heads up the hemigalactic accrediting association for late adolescent and adult education on Mars. (I said it was a simple device . . . I didn't promise it wouldn't be hokey.) But they have quirgles on Mars, not colleges, and the Martian has some questions for you.

"I understand you work at a community college," she says. "How does that compare with a quirgle?"

"I don't know," you reply, "but I'll try to tell you what a community college is, and you can make your own comparisons, OK?"

"OK."

"A community college is a place where--"

"Place? You have to have a place, a central location, for a community college?"

"Well, it's places, really. We do our best to see that there's a community college within reasonable distance of most everyone, and we do quite a lot of off-campus instruction of various kinds."

"The quirgle goes to the Martian--by computer, telebeam, and so on. Do people actually leave their homes and loved ones in order to come to you?"

"Most often, they do. I guess you could say that education on Earth is a very social process. People learn with and through other people."

"OK, go on."

"A community college is a place where people learn . . ."

"Who? What?"

"Our students learn productive and creative skills, how to solve all kinds of problems, and how people of other times and places thought. But now that I think of it, all of us learn. Faculty learn more about their subjects and themselves as they teach. Staff members and administrators learn about human relations, organization, service, and the areas in which they specialize. Community colleges change people. People are different after they've been here."

"What do you mean, 'change'? Could someone learn to be a bigot here? Do you have a course in profiteering? Do you prepare people to be patients in mental institutions?"

"Once in a while, this place does drive a person a little crazy . . . but no, that's an unintended byproduct. We change people in good ways. We help them become happier with themselves and more of an asset to society."

At this point, let me get back to the here-and-now. I've orchestrated this conversation so that it would focus on three of the many possible ways to define the goals of postsecondary education--three that Ben Lawrence, President of NCHEMS, has proposed. First, education institutions exist to produce desirable changes in people. Second, they should do so through means that are consistent with social values. And third, they must maintain their capacity to continue performing their functions in the future. Later I'll return to the idea of having a central place and a social process.

Before looking at each of the three goals, let me comment on why I've chosen to discuss goals in the context of a talk on quality. A quote from Robert Maynard Hutchins says it all:

> The only way you can criticize a university, the only way you can appraise it, the only way you can determine whether it's good or bad or medium or indifferent, is to know what it's about, what it's supposed to be, what it's supposed to be doing. If you don't know these things, you haven't any standards of criticism.

In other words, goals provide necessary context for answering questions like, "Are we good? Better than last year?" This approach won't help determine whether you're better than the Seattle community colleges,

but that's a question I hope you'll agree is irrelevant. The goal approach will help you avoid what has been called "the error of the third kind"--that is, solving the wrong problem well.

By focusing on goals and other contextual aspects of quality, I plan to share with you a point of view about what quality is and how it is improved. Don't expect a long list of do's and don'ts for improving quality--the state of research is too primitive to provide that list, and I am certain that if it existed the list would be too long to be useful. Instead, I'll describe my point of view and then give a short, illustrative list of what people can do to improve quality in that context.

The first goal of educational institutions is to produce desirable changes in people--mainly students. That's why Lewis B. Mayhew wrote, "The proof of an institution's concern with academic and intellectual quality ultimately can probably best be gauged by the qualities of the individuals graduated." More precisely, institutional quality is reflected in the changes in students from the beginning to the end of their program. We are interested in fostering many kinds of changes in students, including those that are academic, intellectual, career-related, and personal. Those kinds of changes are the proper reference points for judging the value of many proposed "reforms" in education--such as changes in class size, changes in pedagogy, and changes in curriculum.

Furthermore, educators must decide how much change is enough--enough to pass a course, enough to earn a degree. And they must evaluate whether each student has accomplished "enough." That is, the institution must not only produce desirable changes; it must also produce a specified amount of change and recognize when students have met those standards. As the quote from Mayhew suggests, institutional quality is often judged by the quality of the students who complete its programs. The college is pronouncing the student "ready." If the world finds that the student is in fact ready, it judges the college "good." But if students are not really ready, the college looks bad. The point seems self-evident, but ensuring that the college acts accordingly is not a trivial problem. Comprehensive qualifying exams are rarely given, so certifying that a student is ready is the product of dozens of individual decisions and many committee decisions. Unless everyone is conscious of the stakes involved, the college stands to lose its reputation for quality.

The first goal also encompasses two other kinds of desirable changes in people. The accumulation of knowledge involves faculty research and creative endeavors, and thus it changes not only faculty themselves but also the substance of future student learning. More central to the mission of most community colleges is the function of community service. The people in the service area of the institution change because of its activities. The changes are of many kinds, including quality of life, citizenship, economic development, and social welfare.

The second goal of educational institutions is to achieve their purposes through means that are consistent with social values--that's why we don't teach bigotry. In addition, satisfying this goal means that the development of human potential is a driving force for nearly everything we do. And we try to develop it in ways that will satisfy the needs of the economy of our service area, yet without impinging on individual freedom of choice. Not least in this area, we try to perform all our activities efficiently.

The third goal is to maintain and enhance the institution's capacity to continue performing its functions in the future. One way to think about the implications of that goal is to ask oneself, "What must we do now and every year in order to be as good or better ten (twenty, fifty) years from now?" The answer encompasses every aspect of the institution, including faculty quality, educational technology, physical facilities, curriculum development, financial management, student recruiting, maintenance and operations, word and data processing--everything. It's almost easier to list actions that do not satisfy this goal--for example, cannibalizing the library budget in times of fiscal stress.

No institution can simultaneously place all the areas that affect its future capacity at the top of its priority list. Institutions seem instead to move naturally through issues--this year it's curriculum renovation, later it's fund raising and financial management, then faculty quality, and so on. I think of this movement as a wave pattern in which issues advance and recede over time. The prevalence of such wave patterns helps explain why institutions do well with different kinds of leadership at different periods of their history.

Our research suggests that two key factors underlie successful juggling of the infinite number of functions required to maintain institutional capacity--respect for people and a shared image of institutional identity. By "respect for people," I mean that the predominant attitude of those in the institution is that they want to do their best for students, employees, and the community. They want to do their best because they believe those constituencies deserve the best they can give. And it is interesting to note that everyone who is trying to do his or her best is also a constituent of everyone else in the institution--so if the attitude is widespread, everyone receives the best from others in exchange for giving their best. And that gives rise to a legitimate assumption on the part of everyone that others around them deserve respect and appreciation. It all becomes a self-enhancing system for being good and getting better.

By "shared image of institutional identity," I mean that everyone associated with the institution shares a common set of ideas about who we are, what we're trying to do, how things are generally done here, and why we care. The concept is very similar to that of individual identity. For both institutions and individuals, self-concept is related to physical characteristics, but also to past experience, ethical foundations, feedback from others, spiritual dimensions, and many other complex factors. If you recall your own adolescence, you know that forming a clear picture of one's identity is a difficult,

sometimes painful, task that is partly determined by genes and fate, but mainly susceptible to decisions you make and stances you adopt toward the world. In an institution, top-quality performance requires that somehow the institution's self-concept is shaped and shared so that it inspires confidence and dedication in those who comprise the institution.

To recap, I've outlined three goals of educational institutions--producing desirable changes in people, doing so in ways that are consistent with social values, and maintaining the capacity to do so in the future. How do we accomplish those goals? With and through people. Learning is an individual matter, but education happens with others. Although the results are ultimately unique to the learner, education is an intensely social process. If it were not, we wouldn't need our elaborate organizational structure, including the more than 3,000 postsecondary institutions, to make it happen.

In organizational behavior we have two related theories--exchange theory and the social contract model. According to those theories, organizations are composed of individuals, each of whom makes a personal contract with the organization. He or she privately agrees to contribute to the organization in exchange for certain benefits. Some of those benefits are financial, but financial benefits are not necessarily the most important. In my view, financial benefits are the least interesting. What would you say if I asked you why you work here, not somewhere else? Part of your answer is financial, but I'll wager that other factors are involved:

> You like the people you work with.
>
> You're proud to be associated with a fine organization.
>
> The office is close to your home.
>
> You have a good chance for promotion.
>
> When you do exceptionally good work, someone notices.

Think of the college as a huge number of transactions among people like the transactions that you share with others at the college. What is given and received in those transactions are a major part of what Dennis Jones, another NCHEMS colleague, calls the intangible assets of the college. At NCHEMS, we are becoming increasingly concerned with the preservation and enhancement of those assets, just as much as the tangible ones.

The exchange or social contract model provides a good backdrop for another observation by Lewis B. Mayhew:

> Neither [state higher education boards nor regional accrediting associations] have appeared to affect quality negatively. Nor is there good reason to expect supra-campus agencies really to affect quality. Academic and intellectual quality is associated with the many small constituencies comprising a college or university

campus. What they do really seems immune to the exhortations of the various educational bureaucracies.

The "many small constituencies" . . . that's you. That's why it matters if a faculty member doesn't keep promised office hours for students, or if an administrator is rude to a secretary, or it takes two hours to get a parking sticker. Suck events are debits to the institution's intangible asset account. They violate the individual's expectation that his or her worth will be respected and efforts appreciated--that the exchange with the organization will be fair.

Preventing debits to the intangible asset account doesn't mean we all go around like Pollyanna all the time. By analogy, consider playing the slot machine. We don't expect a payoff every time, but at least the bells and oranges ought to whirr awhile! And the more payoff you get, the more you want to play. Unlike slots, though, the organization game is not a closed system in which some third-party owner is the real winner. Instead, the system can get infinitely richer, and the players are the winners.

Much of what I've said so far boils down to this: quality encompasses both what you do and what you are. What you do is to make valuable contributions to the lives of people and to certify when they have demonstrated their proficiency. What you are includes tangible and intangible assets that need to be stocked, replenished, and nurtured so you can accomplish your goals. Achieving high quality requires both doing well and being good.

Quality can be improved at many levels--the system of colleges, a single college, a department, or an individual. Many of the principles are the same, regardless of level. So for simplicity, let's suppose that each of you individually has agreed this year to adopt Ford's slogan: "Quality is Job 1." You've agreed to do this on your own, though--no added committee meetings! What I've been saying suggests that you need to undertake mentally at least two tasks before you proceed. You need to consider what quality means in your unique context, and you need to know the identity of the college and your part of it.

Quality can only be improved locally, with reference to local history and context. So you must consider your situation--the best treatment is unique to the patient. Only you really know what's right or wrong here; you are the best judge of the relative value or importance of many possible courses of action; you are in the best position to comprehend the complex dynamics of the situation. You can analyze your situation by asking a number of questions.

First, for whom do I want to make quality better? This means deciding who your key constituents are--board members, secretaries, faculty, custodians, students, local employers, members of a certain department, anyone who happens to walk into your office? Having answered the question, the next step is to try to put yourself in their shoes and understand what it takes to make them feel as if they've had a fair exchange with you, as a representative of the college.

Second, ask yourself, What is the current context of my efforts to improve quality, and what are the conditions likely to be during the period of time that affects my efforts? You are operating in the context of certain conditions, including economic, technological, and human. For example, if students are enrolled this year because unemployment is high and they are worried about their livelihood, that ought to affect what you do regarding students. Furthermore, conditions change over time. Do you want to make quality better by next month? next year? ten years from now? How are conditions likely to change during that time? You need to consider the potential impact of those changes on your efforts.

Finally, ask yourself how you want to define quality. Do you want to do a better job of accomplishing certain goals? Do you want to ensure that your constituents are more satisfied with the college or with your contributions? Do you want to reduce the number or magnitude of certain problems that seem to crop up regularly? Do you want to elicit more students, dollars, good faculty, or other resources from the college's environment? Do you want to improve relationships among people in the college?

Once you have thought about questions like these, you need to be sure you understand why the organization exists, how it is defined, whom it serves, and how it is doing. Your understanding of such factors needs to involve you with the organization, perhaps lead you to feel dedicated to it--even though it isn't perfect. You may or may not believe that you are provided with a reasonable salary. Students may or may not be satisfied with the academic or vocational experiences your college provides. Satisfaction in these areas is important indeed. But as I suggested earlier, reasonable salary and reasonable educational experience are necessary but not sufficient conditions for giving one's efforts to a college. Every single person needs to know exactly what their role is in forming the organization's identity and accomplishing its goals. And they need to know that others recognize, understand, and value the role they play.

Now, at last, I'll list a few do's and don'ts for improving quality. The first few arose from our research in the past three years. They are followed by a few from a study of successful managers done elsewhere.

1. Take responsible action, even if it is not responsive. There's a big difference between giving people what they want and giving them what they need. To yield totally to market demand is to give people what they want. But the responsible educational institution inserts the guiding hand of the knowledgeable professional to identify what people need and teach them to want it.

2. Be sure that essential, basic functions are performed well, even if other functions must be slighted or ignored.

3. Value and enhance the traditions and the historic continuities of the organization.

4. Maintain and expect high integrity, performance levels, and personal character--in yourself, in those you work with, in students. Start on the basis of trust. Do not tolerate untrustworthy behavior.

5. Promote personal, face-to-face communication, especially in times of change or stress.

6. Think more in terms of tasks accomplished than hours spent.

7. Delegate as many consequential tasks--not just trivial ones--as you can.

8. Do not overplan. Approach important tasks with a general strategy, and assume that decisions will become clear as events unfold.

9. Be honest with people, even when it may be painful. Especially when it's painful, remember to be honest in the context of respect and trust.

10. Do everything you can to promote the interests of the people around you who are contributing to quality.

Each of these suggestions follows logically from what I've said about the goals of education, the exchange or social contract view of organizations, and the importance of a shared sense of purpose and identity. None of these suggestions is radically different from what you might have expected me to say. On the basis of your own common sense and human concern, you could extend the list to incorporate a great many valuable, justifiable do's and don'ts.

Sometimes when I see the results of major research efforts, including our own, I marvel at the amount of time, effort, and money it took to demonstrate the validity of such a simple, straightforward concept. The advantage of this phenomenon--and it is an enormous advantage--is that each of you has within you the knowledge and ability to improve quality in the Community Colleges of Spokane. That is why I've titled my remarks "The Many Faces of Quality." The faces are your faces. You are the embodiment of quality here. You don't need somebody from Boulder to tell you what to do. All I can do is assure you that you yourself have the capacity to discover what you need to do and to do it. But in light of a wonderful quotation from the poet T. S. Eliot, I know our research is worthwhile, and I hope our time together has been worthwhile. Eliot said:

> We shall not cease from exploration,
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Thank you very much for your attention, and best wishes for a top-quality school year.

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By Ellen Earle Chaffee

This address, which was presented at the faculty and staff orientation day for the Community Colleges of Spokane, Washington, asks how quality can be improved at different levels in the institution. It emphasizes the importance of a shared sense of purpose and suggests a list of "do's and don'ts" which is based on both existing research and new studies of successful managers.

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